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Orion, the Man Who Would Be Elvis

Miss Cellania • Friday, January 13, 2017 at 2:00 AM

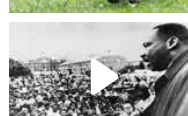
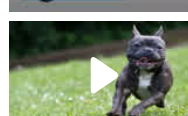
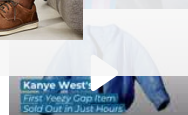
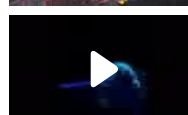
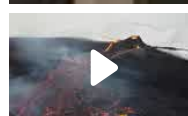
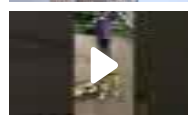
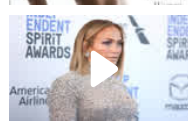
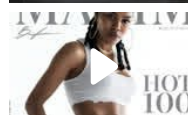
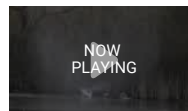
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The following article is from the new book [Uncle John's Uncanny Bathroom Reader](#).

He wasn't Elvis, but he wanted to be...and a lot of people even thought he might be. Here is the bizarre story of Jimmy Ellis, or, as he was also known, Orion.

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(Image credit: [Shelby Singleton](#))

HEARTBREAK HOTEL

By the time he was a teenager, it was clear that Jimmy Ellis had two talents: singing, and



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inadvertently sounding almost exactly like Elvis Presley. In 1962, Ellis entered the Orrville (Alabama) High School talent show. He sang the gospel standard "Peace in the Valley," which had been popularized by Elvis...and won. Then he entered a statewide talent contest...and won that one, too. That earned him \$1,000 and an appearance on TV's *Ted Mack Amateur Hour*. Unfortunately, despite a promising start and a television performance, Ellis did not become a pop sensation.

But he had other options. He rejected an offer to join the Milwaukee Braves, opting instead to go to Middle Georgia Junior College on a baseball scholarship. There he met a record producer named Jimmy Youmans, and the two men cut a single in 1964 called "Don't Count Your Chickens." It was released by a tiny Georgia label called Dradco, and it flopped. Reason: the disc jockeys said Ellis sounded "like a second-rate Elvis." After transferring to a college outside Tuscaloosa, Alabama—where he frequently performed at nightclubs with a set made up almost entirely of Elvis songs—Ellis abandoned music for the second time. He returned to Orrville and took over the family business—breeding horses.

DEVIL IN DISGUISE

Around that same time, Mercury Records vice president Shelby Singleton was having a lot of success producing novelty records. He specialized in Southern acts, such as Brook Benton, with "The Boll Weevil Song," and Ray Stevens, with "Ahab the Arab." In 1966, Singleton left Mercury to form his own label, Plantation Records. The company's first hit, "Harper Valley PTA" by Jeannie C. Riley, sold six million copies, enabling Singleton to expand his business interests. His first purchase: the back catalog of Sun Records, the legendary Memphis record label where Elvis had recorded his first singles, including "That's All Right" and "Blue Moon of Kentucky." Other acts whose early hits Singleton had access to: Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Charlie Rich.

In 1972, Jimmy Ellis was once again bitten by the music bug. He called up a friend, Florida record producer Finlay Duncan, and made a demo tape. Duncan sent the record to Singleton, thinking an Elvis soundalike was a good fit for the label that had helped launch Elvis. Singleton was blown away by the demo, and thought that the smalltime Florida producer had somehow convinced the real Elvis to record a session. Duncan assured him that it wasn't Elvis—this was a different guy entirely.

TREAT ME NICE

Singleton contracted Ellis to record two songs—two very specific songs: "That's All Right" and "Blue Moon of Kentucky," the first two songs Elvis ever recorded back in 1954. But why would audiences care about an Elvis impersonator singing Elvis songs? Singleton knew they wouldn't, without a proper hook. So Singleton released the two songs without Ellis's name on the label, listing the artist as only a large question mark. With the Sun imprint on there, the combined implication was that these were lost recordings of Elvis from the 1950s. But the public still wasn't interested because, by 1972, Elvis, in all his forms, had become passé.

However, the release did get some attention from RCA Records. RCA, the real Elvis home ever since it purchased Elvis contract from Sun in 1955 for \$35,000, threatened to sue Singleton for what it thought was the unauthorized release of an Elvis song. It was only after the company hired a sound analyst to perform a "voice print" on the song and concluded that it wasn't the King, that they dropped the allegations.

Singleton produced one more Ellis single, called "Changing." While the first Ellis single was an imitation of early Elvis, the second was an original song performed in the style of 1970s Elvis—a big ballad with an orchestra. That one didn't hit either, and Ellis left the building at Sun.

RETURN TO SENDER

He didn't quit the music business, though. MCA Records signed Ellis to record one single, another 1970s Elvis-style song called "There Ya Go." MCA heavily promoted Ellis, got the song featured in an episode of the TV drama *McCloud*, and got Ellis an opportunity to perform it on *The Gong Show*, but it fell through. He never appeared on the show. Convinced that stardom was, finally, just around the corner, Ellis moved to Los Angeles in 1976 and spent his life savings on stylists, choreographers, talent coaches, and other experts to help groom him into a star. But all the TV exposure and all the help still didn't work.

So Ellis went back to the South, but not to his horse farm. He went to Macon, Georgia, and signed with tiny Boblo Records. Over 1976 and 1977, Ellis recorded five singles and two albums, one of them all Elvis songs called *Ellis Sings Elvis*. But 15 years of trying to make a name for himself as an Elvis soundalike was starting to take a toll. Ellis wanted to try something more personal, and Boblo

president Bobby Smith let him. What did he do? He wrote and recorded a song called "I'm Not Trying to Be Like Elvis."

And then Elvis died.

IF I CAN DREAM


On August 16, 1977, Elvis Presley died in the bathroom of his Memphis mansion, Graceland, at the age of 42. Music fans around the world went into mourning, and a wave of Elvis nostalgia dominated pop culture. Bobby Smith called up Shelby Singleton in late 1978, arguing that Ellis could fill a hole in the hearts of fans devastated by the death of the King. Smith asked Singleton if Sun would reissue and redistribute Ellis Sings Elvis. Singleton had another idea.

Singleton had heard about a yet-to-be-published novel called *Orion: The Living Superstar of Song*. Penned by first-time author Gail Brewer-Giorgio, it was the story of a poor Southern boy named Orion who becomes the world's most popular singer, only to get addicted to drugs, become obese, and live in seclusion at his grand estate called Dixieland, under the thumb of his controlling manager Colonel Mac. (Sound familiar?) Orion ultimately kicks drugs, loses weight, fakes his own death, and drives off into the sunset. Eerily, Brewer-Giorgio had written the Elvis-inspired novel before Elvis's death, but it wouldn't be published until 1979.

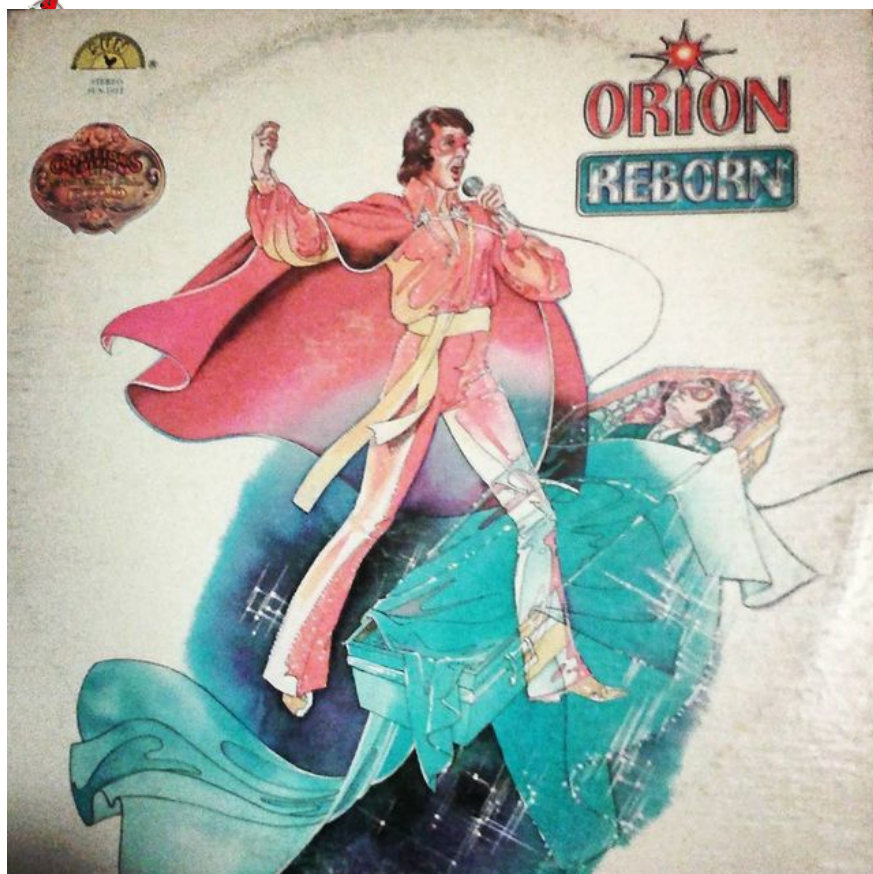
Together, Singleton, Smith, and Ellis decided to blatantly rip off the book: They'd present Ellis as an Elvis-like singer named Orion. They'd dress Ellis in Elvis-style jumpsuits, dye his hair Elvis black...and have him wear a mask when he performed. The goal was to make audiences think that the man who sounded like Elvis actually was Elvis, and that he'd faked his death, just like in the book.

ALL SHOOK UP

Their first job was to acquaint Elvis fans with the Elvis-like voice of Jimmy Ellis. Armed with the Sun back catalog, Singleton overdubbed Ellis singing on nine old Jerry Lee Lewis recordings. Duets, on which Ellis was credited as "Friend," sold more than a million copies, and their version of "Save the Last Dance for Me" was a top 30 hit. And the media behaved exactly the way Singleton hoped they would, speculating that the anonymous "Friend" was Elvis. *Good Morning, America* even had his voice scientifically analyzed—the way RCA Records had done in 1972—and determined that the man on the record was Elvis.

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That could mean one of two things: Either this was an unearthed Elvis song recorded years earlier... or it was a brand-new Elvis song recorded recently, and that the King really was out there, somewhere. In 1978, Sun ended the rumors once and for all...sort of. They announced that Lewis had been accompanied by a singer named Orion. Orion's album *Reborn* was then released, with a cover that pictured Ellis (looking just like Elvis, but with a mask on) crawling out of a coffin and onto a stage. To further obscure things, the first single from *Reborn*, a cover of the Everly Brothers' "Ebony Eyes," included a spoken section, demonstrating that Ellis/Orion had a speaking voice like Elvis, too.

IT'S NOW OR NEVER

It may seem ridiculous now that people could believe that a guy who sounded like Elvis really was Elvis, based only on the vocal similarity, but that's the power of suggestion and grief. Orion toured (primarily around the South), and appeared on hundreds of local TV and radio shows. As he did, tabloids like the *National Enquirer* and the *Weekly World News* reported without hesitation that Orion was Elvis, and that Elvis was alive.

Sun Records pumped out the Orion records at a rapid clip. Between 1978 and 1982, 11 Orion albums were released, generating nine songs that were popular on country radio in the South (enough to reach the lower rungs of Billboard's national country chart). Most of the songs were covers, not just of Elvis but of other acts, such as Queen's "Crazy Little Thing Called Love." Orion was hand-picked to be an opening act for many huge acts, varying from the Oak Ridge Boys to Kiss to Dionne Warwick. Ellis, as Orion, had finally achieved what he'd always wanted: fame and fortune as a recording artist, playing nightly to adoring crowds.



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SUSPICIOUS MINDS

The only problem: Ellis hated being Orion. Although he was one of the first Elvis impersonators, by 1981, there were hundreds competing with Orion to perform at the same nightclubs and small theaters. Ellis didn't even consider himself an impersonator—he considered himself a real, one-of-a-kind performer who could write and sing his own songs. He asked Singleton if he could record under his own name once again, and drop the mask. Singleton rejected the idea. Why abandon the sure thing they had (with "Orion") and attempt the thing that had failed so many times before (the career of Jimmy Ellis)? Ellis kept asking, and Singleton kept turning him down.

Frustrated by the limitations of his job and unable to express himself musically, Ellis began to suffer something of an identity crisis. Both resenting and worshipping Elvis, he started to believe that he might actually be related to the King. Ellis had been given up for adoption at the age of two. His biological father was listed on his birth certificate only as "Vernon." Elvis's parents, Gladys and Vernon Presley, had split up for a while in the mid-1940s, and Vernon Presley had reportedly lived near where Ellis was born in Alabama. For a time, Ellis truly believed that Vernon Presley was his real father, which explained why he had so many uncanny similarities with Elvis.



[\(YouTube link\)](#)

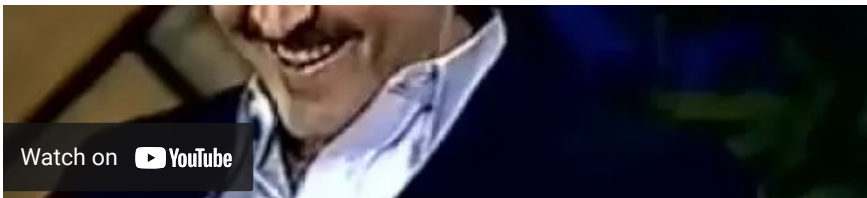
T-R-O-U-B-L-E

While the real Elvis' career ended with a whimper—a nostalgia act playing in Las Vegas casinos—Orion's ended with a bang. For New Year's Eve 1983, Ellis-as-Orion had been booked at the Eastern States Exposition in Massachusetts, the biggest headlining gig he'd ever had. At the end of his performance, Ellis tore off the Orion mask in front of a crowd of 5,000 people and announced that he wasn't Orion—he was James Ellis. Photos of the moment ran in newspapers around the country, proving beyond a doubt that the man behind the mask was definitely not the King.

While few people really thought that Orion was Elvis Presley, removing the Orion mask was still career suicide. Not only was the commercial gimmick gone, but Ellis had openly defied Shelby Singleton. In early 1984, Ellis met with Singleton at Sun Records, and all contracts relating to Orion were canceled. Singleton later said that after Ellis left Orion behind, more than 100 Elvis impersonators approached him, asking if they could step into the Orion persona...and he turned them all down.

CODA





([YouTube link](#))

Ellis had tried to be a star in his own right so many times that he just couldn't stop, even after the Orion debacle. In 1987, he played fairs and small clubs around the South under various names—Jim Ellis, James Ellis, Ellis James—but never Orion. Oddly enough, because most people knew him as the guy in the Orion mask, he kept wearing rhinestone decorated masks on stage. As late as 1995, Ellis could still bring in an audience of around 500 people a night. But performing wasn't enough to earn a living, so Ellis augmented his income by opening several businesses off the highway that ran by his Alabama family farm. He owned a liquor store, a convenience store, a gas station, and a pawn shop. He was manning the counter at the pawn shop in 1998 when he was gunned down by an armed robber. Ellis was 53.


The article above is reprinted with permission from Uncle John's **newest** volume, ***Uncle John's Uncanny Bathroom Reader***. The 29th volume of the series is chock-full of fascinating stories, facts, and lists, and comes in both the Kindle version and paperback.

Since 1988, the Bathroom Reader Institute had published a series of popular books containing irresistible **bits of trivia and obscure yet fascinating facts**. If you like Neatorama, you'll love the **Bathroom Reader Institute's books** - go ahead and check 'em out!

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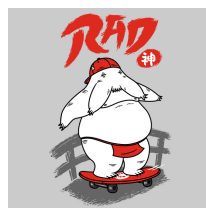
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